

HILDENBOROUGH PARISH COUNCIL

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Minutes of Public Meeting held on Tuesday, 4 February 2014 in St John's Church Hall at 7.30pm

Present:	Mr M Dobson (chairman)	Mr S Medlock (T&MBC)
	Mr M O'Brien (T&MBC)	Mr A Pearce (EA)
	Mr N Gunn (EA)	Mr T Norton (EA)
Also present:	Mrs P Gow (Clerk)	Cllr Rhodes
	Cllr V Dagger	
	Parish Councillors	M Baker
	M Brown	M Coles
	D Haugh	M Nairne
	N Simpkins	
	Approximately 180 residents	

The chairman welcome everyone and introduced officers from Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council and the Environment Agency.

Andrew Pearce, Area Manager for Kent and South London who is responsible for Kent, Surrey and London, including the Thames Barrier, said he had worked for the Environment Agency for 21 years and was on duty on Christmas Eve, 2013.

He went on to explain the role of the Environment Agency as having an operational role, looking after assets and providing a flood warning service. He said they wanted to look at what had happened over Christmas from residents' points of view and investigate what could be done to alleviate the impact of flooding. The Environment Agency would be happy to come along and meet with residents again should this prove necessary.

Mr Pearce handed over to Neil Gunn to explain the operation of the Leigh Barrier and the events which led up to the flooding during the Christmas holiday.

Mr Gunn provided an illustrated commentary on what occurred from 23rd December. He said the amount of rain falling during this time was very exceptional with 60-70mm of rain falling in the Upper Medway catchment area on already saturated ground. It has been the wettest December ever with 500% of long term rain falling. He illustrated this by saying in 1968 there was 250 m³ in 2000 220 m³ and in 2013 300+ m³.

He provided a map which showed which areas were at risk of flooding from the River Medway in Hildenborough. The Environment Agency has a supervisory role of flooding from all sources.

Mr Norton is the team leader and he sets up systems. He said the Environment Agency do not offer a system for a flood warning in Hildenborough because of the complex nature of flooding which occurs in the area. In addition to the River Medway backing up through Hawden Stream, there was surface water, drainage ditches and foul water. Any flood warning system would be unreliable because of the complexity of the flooding.

It is possible for Hildenborough residents to be given the same level of flood warning as residents and businesses in Tonbridge and an offer was made to include those who signed up, using the forms on the chairs or on line, but this would only be for flooding from the River Medway.

Mr Gunn then explained the working of the Leigh Flood Barrier. He said there were some misconceptions of how it works and went on to say that it was designed to reduce the risk of flooding in Tonbridge passing some benefit further downstream. It is 1.5 km long and 5m high at its highest and hold 5.5 mill. m³ of water. It is managed by three radial gates with one, at least, always being open. Only trained operators are allowed to use it and they undertake regular exercises using simulated events of all types.

During the Christmas period there were numerous checks, and inspecting engineers were on site during Christmas. At the beginning of December the storage was empty and by Christmas day it was full. They are continually updated by the Met Office who supplies 5 day ahead forecasts, which are fine tuned as any expected damaging event approaches. Rainfall is measured at multiple locations up and down stream of the barrier. The flow is measured in cubic metres per second and there was a peak maximum of 342 m³ per second the safe level is 160 m³ a second. The legal storage is a maximum of 28.0 mAOD/ 5.5mill m³. This is set out by the Reservoir's Act.

Looking to the future, capital investment is planned in the Medway Catchment Plan and is directed to raising the available storage in the Leigh Barrier to 10.10 mill m³. It is estimated this will be by 2035 and would involve raising the barrier by 1m. Funding is from a number of different sources and could be brought forward should this investment be made available.

There are other options to investigate such as changing the legal maximum from 28.0 to 28.5 mAOD. A safety gap must be left at the top. The Agency want to build a clear picture of what has caused the flooding so they can work with the Upper Medway Internal Drainage Board, Borough Council etc. They know that giving flood warnings help to cut the cost and community action can help with this.

Mr Dobson opened the meeting up to questions from the floor.

The first questioner wanted reassurance that all the equipment at the barrier was in working order on the days between 21 and 26 December, confirmation the rules on operation were followed and it was manned 24 hours every day. The answer to all of these was yes. He went on to say that during the summer when no rain is forecast there is no one monitoring but beyond a certain threshold there is always monitoring taking place. There was an offer to give the logs to the Parish Council for the critical period during Christmas.

The next questioner wanted to know what caused the flood. The answer was that the Environment Agency did their very best to reduce the risk but were beaten by the intensity of rain.

The third questioner wanted to know why the Environment Agency does not have a plan of the whole drainage system. This is not the responsibility of the Environment Agency but they will form technical groups with Kent Highways, Upper Medway Internal Drainage Board, and Southern Water to see if there are solutions to the highways drainage.

A local resident of Leigh Road said that Leigh Road was cut off for a considerable number of days during the Christmas period because a drain was blocked. Kent Highways' engineers would not listen to local residents who explained what the problem was and instead installed a pump for a number of days. Finally last week the drain was repaired in anticipation of tonight's meeting.

There was criticism of Kent Highways for not maintaining the gulleys and drains and it was felt they needed to reprioritize their resources.

Historically the Parish Council managed a flood warning system with wardens but this was disbanded by the Environment Agency in 2003. It was hoped that following the information gathered at this meeting a more effective system would result to warn residents of flooding.

The next questioner had noted that the flooding coincided with high tides and asked whether this would have had an effect on the volume of water flooding the water meadows. They also wanted to know why more water wasn't released earlier to alleviate the problem. It was further stated that in the past all agencies had quickly pulled together.

In response Mr Norton said that there was multi-agency action on Christmas Eve. He explained the system is to have a severe weather telephone conference with the Met Office and all agencies when there is a vague threat. All agencies are alerted and come together when it is established this is an actual threat. The questioner asked when this happened on this occasion. The answer was they did not know but would answer this at the meeting to be held in Tonbridge on 5th February. There would already have been a review of flooding but this had been cancelled due to the continued bad weather and threat of more flooding this coming weekend.

Co-ordination of agencies would in future be located at Tonbridge Gateway and they will be working together to provide a better service. It was agreed this was lacking at Christmas.

In answer to the second part of the question it was explained that the tide did not have any effect on the extent of the flooding as the furthest tidal effect had been recorded at East Farleigh. The Leigh Flood storage area leaflet gives details of how the volume of a known inflow is managed to optimise its use. The reservoir has to be kept below the legal limit and so the rest is let out. There is a safe volume release level and at 180 m³ per second Tonbridge floods. A senior manager has to sign off a discharge above normal. On Christmas Eve the level was within 10mm of maximum level and this was being monitored at 15min. intervals. It was as close to a perfect operation as could have been expected. There was more water coming in than flowing out and so the gates had to be opened to release more water.

It was accepted that the flood ambassadors sent out to the affected areas had not done a good job in Hildenborough and this was identified by managers who immediately organised training before they were reallocated to other areas and further training will be put in place.

The capacity of the bridges is critical as these hold back water and increase the extent of the flooded area beyond the water meadows. It was suggested that dredging the river would help to address the lack of capacity under the bridges. The response was that it would be considered during the review.

Finding funding sources would be a priority before any work could be undertaken and discussions will take place with Paul Carter, KCC Leader, next week.

The next question concerned the late warnings given. The questioner was flooded at 2.10pm and the flood warning came 2hrs later. Earlier in the day there was nothing in the Hawden Stream, all the water came from Tonbridge. 157 people were flooded in Hildenborough and 127 in Tonbridge. Tonbridge residents get warnings but Hildenborough residents do not.

The respondent reiterated that flooding in Hildenborough comes from a number of different sources, sewage, drainage and ditches and consequently the service was withdrawn as inappropriate. Those who do get flooded as a result of the River Medway will be given the same service as for Tonbridge.

A further discussion took place on the effect of raising the height of the flood by 0.5m. This would result in it becoming level with the railway line. The proposed project for 2035 would be looking at ways to protect the railway line should the height be raised.

It was suggested by the questioner that a 1m bund at the back of the gardens would protect houses from flooding and the water could be safely stored in the water meadow beyond. The response from the Environment Agency was that this could have an impact further upstream or further afield on the flood plain and this would need to be modelled.

Residents were urged to sign up for flood alerts as this weekend it was currently predicted by the Met Office that high winds and very heavy rain would affect this area. There has been rain every day since Christmas but not with the same intensity and so far, to date, further flooding has been averted.

The Environment Agency would be looking into what could be done in the short term which would have a high impact on flooding.

Residents continued to express their frustration at only receiving a 20 min. warning, if any at all. It was stated that residents in Hawden Close did have sufficient time to raise some of their furniture

The Environment Agency reiterated that they would be looking at the information gathered via the current meetings with the aim to improve the flood warning system, and have more timely, accurate and consequently a better co-ordination between agencies. Resources will be focussed and better information provided than at Christmas. They are happy to hold a surgery to meet with individuals, bringing in more staff to answer questions.

Cllr Rhodes said he received his flood warning at work only to be told by his son the water was in the garden. He raced home and went straight round to Leybank and Bramble Close. He went on to say that the Environment Agency staff who arrived did not know anything and did not give any support.

(As noted above the Environment Agency agreed there was room for improvement and since given training.)

Since 2000 things have been pretty good and he had a feeling we had been caught napping. The next time it was requested that the amount of water to be released should be stated. It was further suggested that flood ambassadors would be better replaced by local flood wardens. There was a scheme managed by the Parish Council which had been disbanded by the Environment Agency. The need is to find a system to disseminate information accurately and quickly, such as a cascade system.

The next questioner said that at noon they were told by the Environment Agency there was no flooding likely but within a few hours there was flooding. The Environment Agency would look into this and see what was logged. It was further asked whether dredging the reservoir would help, Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council had asked for permission and some de silting had been done. The Environment Agency would sort out all the information to find what was true and what could be done. The drainage issue and long term works would be looked into.

The Environment Agency promised a forward command centre, closer liaison between Leigh control room and on the ground, they would make sure agency staff and Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council received information. They will try to put as much as possible in place before this weekend.

Another questioner enquired why Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council, on their website, gave instructions to buy sand bags from B & Q. The officer replied that they hold a stock of 2,000 and very quickly ran out. They admitted there were not enough to go round all properties at immediate risk to flooding. It was suggested that a local support system would help disabled and vulnerable people as they could not rely on local authority support.

Looking forward it was hoped that flood warnings could be sent by text. The Environment Agency would be looking to working with the community to sort out flood warnings. They would be arranging a surgery via the Parish Council. Residents were reminded to return the questionnaires which had been distributed. These would give valuable information on the extent and causes of flooding.

Mr Dobson thanked everyone for their contributions and promised a special Parish Council meeting to bring back further information and suggestions for the future.